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CHAPTER III

000 CONSIDERING the climate and the conditions, we worked extremely hard at Sharjah, for the desert is not often conducive to continuous and concentrated desk work, and being cooped up in an office all day was not always desirable. But for these occasional excursions to the beach, with a longer trip into the interior now and then, life would have been unbearably monotonous.

One of my duties as Station Manager was to visit the emergency alighting area at Ras-al-Khaimah every two months, to inspect the mooring buoys and ensure that they had been kept in good condition; I also had to check the stocks of petrol, which were kept on barges in the creek, to make certain that no leakages, accidental or intentional, had occurred, and to arrange for periodical replacements.

491 Owing to the bad state of the 'roads' beyond Sharjah, which heavy rains had rendered impassable to wheeled traffic, it was not possible for us to visit Ras-al-Khaimah until 24th February, 1945. One uses the word 'road' here in a general sense, since there are no metalled or rolled highways in the whole breadth and length of Oman, least of all in the direction of Ras-al-Khaimah. Between Sharjah and Dubai a track has been created by cars and trucks, which bears some resemblance to a motor road, and its surface, at any rate in dry weather, is hard and smooth. Everywhere else the only highways are camel and donkey tracks, emphasized here and there by tyre marks in the sand. In places where the sand is still wet and boggy, one sees pits where vehicles have sunk in the mud up to their axles. Yet, of all the roads in Oman, I have never seen one like that which runs, curves and dips between Sharjah and Ras-al-Khaimah. Even to an experienced dirt-track rider it would seem a nightmare, and no one who respected his motor-car would dream of negotiating it except in emergency. However, our visit was imperative and could not be put off either on account of bumps and sandhills or the woeful lack of suitable transport.

The distance is, roughly, seventy miles, but a journey three times as long would not cause half as much damage to the springs

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

of a car, or use so much petrol (ten gallons each way). A comparable trip would be to take a car straight across Dartmoor, ignoring all roads and tracks, and going ahead through bracken, fells and over the tors. Such a journey could not possibly harm a car more than this trip to Ras-al-Khaimah. In the few roads shown on a large-scale military map of Oman, that to Ras-al-Khaimah is not indicated, although a few inter-related camel tracks are shown. Yet, in ways other than those connected with motoring, it is one of the most interesting journeys I have made in that part of Arabia.

Two vehicles were requisitioned for the journey; a 15-cwt., four-wheeled drive, Western Desert battle-wagon, belonging to the R.A.F. (and known for some inexplicable reason as a 'fish and chip' wagon by the troops), and a Ford V-8 brake or station wagon. Neither was in an exemplary state, the ignition system of the truck being notoriously erratic, while the station wagon, which belonged to the Fort, had just returned from the workshops after a major overhaul. Both were still convalescent and uncertain on their wheels, but they were the only transport we could procure. All our supplies had to come by sea, new vehicles were impossible to obtain, whilst spares were very grudgingly released by Headquarters after a lengthy exchange of vituperous correspondence.

The party consisted of eight: S/Ldr. Percy Cranley, the Officer Commanding the R.A.F. Unit; myself; the Medical Officer (F/Lt. Cargill); the Station Engineer (Sparkes); the Station Coxswain (Jock Frew); the Radio Officer (Stanton); the Junior Coxswain (Canteenwallah); the Khan Sahib Hussein, Agent for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company; and Suleman Beg, our driver.

After an early breakfast, we set off at seven o'clock, with the station wagon leading. We picked up the Khan Sahib at his residence in Sharjah and set off in a north-easterly direction left of the Sheikh's Wells, where we met the other vehicle. For the first ten miles the journey was uninteresting, consisting of a soft sand-track in which our wheels slithered continuously, making steering very difficult. There was no vegetation to speak of, apart from the ever-present scrub and desert stonecrop, with occasional clumps of *ashgar*, a poisonous plant with broad, greyish leaves, from which the Arabs make an inferior gunpowder, since it contains saltpetre. A speed greater than twelve miles an hour was not possible at this stage of the journey, but shortly after eight o'clock we left the sand-hills and entered a tract of hard, smooth desert which spread, flat and interminable, for twenty miles or so.

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

all the fun that he could out of desert life, yet he worked exceedingly hard and devoted several hours each day to the study of Arabic.

Tandy had been instructed to pay a visit to Djaidh to discuss with the tribal leaders the continuation of work on the wells which irrigate the large date plantations for which this district is famous. Djaidh, which is not a village but a district, lies about fifty miles east of Sharjah on the direct camel route, but the sand tracks are extremely soft for vehicular traffic and Tandy had chosen a circular route by way of Falat-al-'Ali and Muraq-quibat, where the road is reasonably good and has a hard surface. It added twenty miles to the journey, but the extra comfort and ease of travel compensated for this.

I had been invited to join the party, since Captain Tandy had expectations of meeting Sheikh Mahommed bin Ali, ruler of the wild Beni Quitab tribe of Bedouins. I had often expressed a wish to see this chief, whose fierceness and bold character were celebrated in Oman; I never expected to have this privilege, for the Beni Quitab lived in remote and inaccessible parts of the desert, mostly at the foothills of the Jebel-al-Faiyah range, and were continually changing their camping-ground. It was reported, moreover, that they were hostile to foreigners and that Sheikh Mahommed had met only two Europeans, one of them being Sir Geoffrey Prior, the British Resident, who had difficulty in finding him. Arabs are very chary of giving information to foreigners concerning the whereabouts of Bedouin tribes, presumably because they fear reprisals.

Owing to the waterless nature of Oman—which is, geographically, merely a coastal extension of the Great Southern Desert, or Rub-al-Khali—date plantations of any appreciable size are rare. On the Oman Gulf side of the peninsula, and at Muscat, they flourish to such an extent that their export forms one of the staple industries of this part of south-east Arabia, but west of the Shimailiyah the only large plantations are at Falaj-al-'Ali and Djaidh, where their ownership is shared by the tribes in common. Djaidh is neutral territory, but the responsibility for managing the plantations is divided between the Sheikhs of Sharjah and Kalba; the Sheikh of Ras-al-Khaimah is responsible for the plantations at Falaj-al-'Ali, although the Sheikh of Umm-al-Quwain has some interest in this plantation. The district is inhabited by Kalba tribesmen, who live in encampments near the wells; they are responsible, through their headmen or sub-chiefs, for the maintenance of the irrigation